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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 004463

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SUBJECT: ELYSEE SECRETARY GENERAL FLIES TO BEIRUT NOVEMBER 9

REF: BEIRUT 1752 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: Claude Gueant, secretary general of the French presidency, arrived in Beirut November 9 for meetings with Lebanese focused on the presidential election -- with an expected emphasis on securing the Maronite Patriarch's agreement to develop an acceptable list of names. Speculation in advance of the trip included claims that the recent trip to Damascus by Gueant and President Sarkozy's diplomatic adviser Levitte had created a new rift between the MFA and the Elysee. The MFA sought to downplay such speculation in a statement November 8 that confirmed Gueant's intention to visit Beirut. Basile Yared, Saad Hariri's representative in Paris, meanwhile (and in addition to appealing for international guarantees for Lebanon) complained that France had misled Saad by not holding firm in presenting one plan to draw up names to the Syrians and instead accepting a plan Syrian President Assad had proposed. He doubted the Patriarch would accept the French proposal and argued Kouchner had agreed to the Elysee's intervention to preserve his role in a process he had started despite Elysee disinterest. Gueant announced in Beirut that Kouchner would follow him next week to continue French efforts to facilitate an election. End summary

2. (C) The secretary general of the French Presidency, Claude Gueant, traveled to Beirut November 9 to follow up the visit he and French presidential diplomatic adviser Jean-David Levitte made to Damascus November 4. (Comment: We do not have any explanation as to why Levitte did not accompany Gueant to Beirut. End comment) Gueant's arrival statement to reporters noted French President Sarkozy's inability, given his attachment to Lebanon and its people, to watch Lebanon plagued by crises. He underscored the great importance to France of the Lebanese presidential election being held on time and according to the constitutional rules and respect for Lebanese sovereignty and independence (without) foreign interference. Gueant apparently did not reveal that the real focus of his visit, as recent reporting from Embassy Beirut has indicated, would be to persuade Maronite Patriarch Sfeir to accept an apparent Syrian proposal that Sfeir develop a list of five acceptable presidential candidates that Lebanese parliament speaker Nabih Berri and March 14 leader Saad Hariri could narrow down. Speculation on this trip and the previous one to

Damascus, as well as the rift they had reportedly engendered between the MFA and the Elysee, prompted the MFA to confirm Gueant's imminent trip in its November 8 press briefing. The response to a Lebanese journalist's lengthy query read as follows (per this embassy's informal translation):

These trips occur as the result of close coordination between the Elysee and the Quai d'Orsay. The secretary general of the Elysee will moreover be accompanied to Beirut by the adviser to the minister in charge of this file. (Note: We assume this means Christophe Bigot, who handles NEA affairs in Kouchner's cabinet. End note) As for the minister, he has several times indicated that he is available to return to Lebanon before the vote if that would be useful.

13. (C) Polmincouns and poloff called on Saad Hariri, representative in Paris, Basile Yared, to get his take on Gueant's upcoming trip, the apparent shift in French approach, and the current situation in Lebanon. Yared provided a rather different account of the development of the Elysee's recent initiative with the Syrians. According to Yared, the French (NFI as to who exactly) conferred with Saad and Yared prior to French presidential diplomatic adviser Levitte's and Guant's departure for Damascus and laid out what Yared claimed was an entirely French proposal asking March 14 to draw up a list of 5-7 names which would be vetted with the Patriarch before it was submitted to Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri. Saad and Yared listened and, despite concerns that the French would meet with Asad and were planning to go to Syria without intending to stick to reiterating a tough warning of the consequences should no new president be elected by November 24, they assented to the approach. Yared said that he and Saad were shocked when, upon returning to Paris, the French reported that Asad had recast the proposal to the one described in Beirut's recent reporting, i.e., a list of five drawn up solely by the

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Patriarch to be vetted with Berri and Hariri. As Yared and Saad understood it, the French had promised they would present Asad a "take-it-or-leave-it" proposal and not something he could modify. The most charitable interpretation Yared could put on what actually came out was that the French were unprepared for Asad's cordial welcome and presentation of his own proposal. We did not challenge Yared's version of events, including his significant denial that Saad had anything to do with the proposal Guant and Levitte took to Damascus.

14. (C) Before Yared went much further, he took a few minutes to deliver what he clearly considered his key message to the USG: Lebanon needs clear and concrete guarantees of international, and specifically U.S., backing as it moves into the most sensitive phase of the election process. These guarantees were necessary, he explained, to fortify March 14's resolve to press ahead, should the situation require, with a simple majority vote to elect a president. Without them, instability would likely ensue. Yared said the guarantees needed to stress the importance of upholding commitments under UNSCRs 1559 and 1701 as well as proceeding with the establishment and functioning of the Special Tribunal. Evoking familiar worst case scenarios, Yared was confident Lebanon, in the wake of a failed election, faced a new wave of bombings and Hizballah's seizure of various ministries and other key installations. We assured Yared we would pass his message along to Washington.

15. (C) Returning to the anticipated French proposal to the Patriarch on the preparation of a list of acceptable candidates, Yared claimed Saad had not yet spoken to the Patriarch following his return but had sent a relative named Nadir to brief the Patriarch. Yared reported that the Patriarch had neither accepted nor rejected the proposal but indicated he wanted a process that would guarantee election of a president by the November 24 deadline. We asked whether that meant the Patriarch had softened his stance seeming to

reject election by a simple majority. Yared replied by repeating the Patriarch's determination to see someone elected before Emile Lahoud leaves office. As an aside, Yared bluntly stated that Nassib Lahoud remained March 14's preferred candidate for the presidency, although that did not necessarily translate into belief that Nassib could be elected.

16. (C) Yared agreed with the interpretation of these latest French moves that we have been hearing that the Elysee has moved from the relative disinterest it showed toward Lebanon in July (when Kouchner started his efforts with the intra-Lebanese conference at la Celle St.-Cloud) to impatience with Kouchner's approach as the November 24 deadline approaches. He described in familiar terms internal conflict between partisans of a hard line with Syria and those advocating dialogue. Although most of the Elysee falls into the latter category, the division is most acute at the MFA. Yared was vague in terms of estimating where Kouchner came out but said that Kouchner was determined to avoid being elbowed out of the picture. Related to this, Yared contended that the Elysee's engagement with Bashar al-Asad had effectively raised the stakes inexorably for the French. While it was premature to exclude Kouchner as a player in the ongoing dialogue with Syria, Bashar was effectively now talking to Sarkozy. The next logical step was for Sarkozy to meet Bashar, although Yared did not predict that would happen. He also understood that the impending trip to Beirut would not include a stop in Damascus. (Comment: Gueant asserted on his arrival in Beirut that Kouchner would follow up with a visit next week to continue French efforts aimed at facilitating a successful election. End comment)

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